

NOT SO FAST, LOUIS – A FABLE FOR OUR TIME

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Pasteur is widely credited with demonstrating, in 1859, that spontaneous generation – the creation of living from non-living matter – is not possible. To show this, he put beef broth in a crook-neck flask and sterilized the broth by heat. The crook-neck made it difficult for (presumably contaminated) dust from the outside air to enter the broth, but otherwise allowed a free exchange of air. The sterilized broth remained clear several days after this treatment (but the control became cloudy) – evidence, at least in Pasteur’s view, that living material was not spontaneously being generated in the broth.

Fast forward to 2020 ...

“You gotta see this!” the electrician working on an ancient electrical breaker box in my basement shouted up the stairwell.

I joined him next to the box, whose tight-fitting screw-on cover he had just removed. Inside the box was a dead mouse, shorted between the bus bars. There was no way the mouse could have entered the box through the cover, and the electrical tubing connected to the box was jammed so full of wire that no mouse could have entered that way, either. There was no other access to the box.

In the face of such evidence, those who worship Occam’s Razor would be sorely tempted to entertain the hypothesis that a mouse can spontaneously generate in a breaker box.

Moral:

1. Generalizing from microbes to mice is always less reliable than it seems.
2. It’s best to accept the testimony of other mice about bus bars.